

Environmental burning underway at PBA

The Pine Bluff Arsenal announced Feb. 16 that it would engage in burning selected areas on the Arsenal as an environmental measure.

The Arsenal made this announcement in advance, in order to alert local communities for the potential of large, visible smoke plumes originating at the Arsenal. The Arsenal does not want those plumes to cause alarm.

According to Charles Becker, Pine Bluff Arsenal's natural resources specialist, the Arsenal has contracted with the Nature Conservancy's Arkansas Field Office to conduct prescribed burns on more than 300 acres of woodlands that were selectively cut during the past few years. The prescribed burns will take place through the end of March whenever the weather is favorable.

The Nature Conservancy is a non-profit conservation organization and is experienced in using prescribed burns to restore fire to fire-maintained ecosystems to maintain or improve habitat for rare species.

"Specially trained and equipped crews skilled in fire management operations will conduct the prescribed burns," said Becker. "Weather conditions such as rain, high winds and the direction of the wind are also taken into consideration when conducting the burns to prevent smoking in sensitive areas."

Fires were historically a natural part of maintaining gulf coastal plain ecosystems, and they kept the woodland open and the prairies free of brush. Lightning and Native Americans caused fires. Native Americans burned to stimulate berry and acorn production, improve forage for game species, and clear areas for travel. Prescribed burning is also used to reduce heavy build-up of dead wood and other debris, reducing the possibility of severe wildfires during droughts.

"Many of the eight rare species of plants identified during biological surveys at Pine Bluff Arsenal are dependent on fire to survive," said Becker.

"Safety is emphasized in all phases of fire management," Becker added. "Conservancy fire staff will be working closely with base fire protection officials during the planning process and the burn itself."